





VALEDICTORY ORATION  
DELIVERED AT THE  
LATE COMMENCEMENT  
IN THE  
PHILADELPHIA ACADEMY,

JULY 27, 1809.

By Mr. JAMES P. MORRIS.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

HAVING gone through the usual course of education in this seminary of learning; having passed the ordeal trials of private and publick examination, I am now in full and joyful expectation of receiving those parchment honours, which are to certify the success of my studies, and prove to a believing world, that my labour hath not been in vain.

But I have been informed, that before my temples can be crowned with literary laurels, it is expected that I should address you, ladies and gentlemen, in an elegant speech on this grand occasion.

Unreasonable as this demand seemed to me, being long accustomed to the passive obedience and nonresistance of a school, I earnestly endeavoured to comply with it. I had recourse to books, to solitary walks, to ardent invocations, and all the usual provocatives to

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good writing. I chose for my subject the dignity and advantage of a complete English Education, and the excellent mode of attaining it in the Philadelphia Academy. I began with a warm apostrophe to this building, in manner and form following. O ye sacred walls! ye venerable stools and benches! and thou, expanded arch! that hast so often echoed the sweet effusions of those aspiring youths who have in times past been nurtured within your hallowed precincts, hear! O hear! one of your latest sons testify the ardour with which he feels himself inspired, on escaping from your gloomy confines. Thus far all was well—but what to say next was the difficulty. Whilst I was making every possible effort to proceed, an unlucky line of a distressed poet, who was composing new year's verses, popped into my head, viz. “What can I say, that han't been said before?” This ridiculous question quenched all my enthusiasm in a moment; nothing could be more unfortunate: I certainly proposed, ladies and gentlemen, to have made a very eloquent speech, exemplifying all the possible ornaments of language, expressed in the most grammatical and logical form: but my good intention having been thus unhappily frustrated, I must e'en endeavour to express my sentiments in plain English. Yet, although I am under the necessity to change the intended style of my speech, I shall not abandon the subject I had chosen;\* for I have been here taught that perseverance is a cardinal virtue in the character of a scholar, and that the life of a student is a life of perpe-

\* For the greater part of this introductory portion of the address the writer is indebted to the works of the late Francis Hopkinson, Esq. being the exordium of an oration written by that gentleman for one of the graduates of the university: *Vide Hopkinson's works, vol. 1.*

tual warfare. I have been daily told, " You must consider your lesson as an enemy you have to encounter: if you conquer it, you will for ever command its services, and be rewarded with honour and reputation, but if it defeats you, ignorance and disgrace will assuredly be your portion." From the influence of this principle, therefore, having grappled, I am resolved to hold fast my subject, be the issue what it may: the chance, I know, is against me, as I am not accustomed to extempore speaking; but my confidence in the liberality, indulgence, and benevolence of this polite audience, seems to inspire me with invincible courage. So much for my exordium, which is one sixth part of my oration; and I think tolerably well executed. To begin then the detail of our instruction here.

As soon as a youngster can read trisyllables with any degree of facility, a Grammar is put into his hands, and he is required to commit a portion of it to memory every night, grammar being the very foundation of language, and justly so termed, its rules being as hard, as rough, and, unpolished, as the stones which constitute the walls of a cellar. Through all the mazes of this grammar, the sounds of the letters, the proper division of syllables, the properties of the different parts of speech, the rules of syntax, and the puzzling perplexities of prosody; he is obliged to wade, groping for some time in utter darkness, and learning by rote a complicated system of rules, the propriety or application of which it is impossible for him to see, at the time he is learning them; but, when he begins to parse, then the beauty, the symmetry, the connexion of the before incomprehensible whole begins to appear; like the genial rays of

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a meridian sun, after a dark and gloomy thunder storm, (and such often occur within the walls of this building) the light of knowledge beams with the most invigorating radiance upon his hitherto torpid faculties. He feels himself in possession of a new character, and brings not only all the written but the colloquial language he meets with to the test of his grammatical skill. Often, indeed, have I, while silently sitting at my father's fireside, pitied the ignorance of otherwise very respectable characters, for the torrent of ungrammatical jargon which they poured out; nay, I have more than once detected members of Congress tripping; and what was still more astonishing and distressing to me, I have even sometimes heard grammatical errors from the fair mouths of the ladies.

The next branch to which our attention was called is that of Composition, by which we were instructed how to connect sentences together so as to form a good style, accommodated to the nature of the subject to be discussed; we were taught the peculiarities of the concise and diffuse, the nervous and the feeble, the vehement and the plain; the neat, the graceful, the florid, the simple and affected style, together with all the ornaments of figurative language, from the trope to the allegory, from the cold discussion of a philosophick theory to the animated, glittering, and glowing rhapsody of an eastern tale, a townmeeting address, or, ladies, a passionate love letter.

Having thus enjoyed the opportunity of rendering ourselves masters of written language, we were called upon to study Elocution, or the art of reading or reciting with justness, energy, propriety, and ease, either our own

sentiments, or those of others, whether communicated in prose or verse, with the peculiarities attached to each species of oratory, for the pulpit, the senate, or the bar.

We were next introduced to an acquaintance with Natural History, or the properties and various classifications of the objects which surround us, in the three kingdoms of nature; the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal; the composition of fossils and minerals; the construction of trees and plants; and the form and faculties of living creatures, from the majestic rotundity of the mighty mammoth, to the delicate organization of prairie dogs.

Geography, or a knowledge of "this great globe which we inhabit," followed next; by which the relative situation of countries, their boundaries, their rivers, mountains, &c. are precisely ascertained; so that we can now read a newspaper with peculiar delight, as we can travel in imagination over the whole globe, through oceans, over mountains, across deserts and uncivilized regions, without either the risk of life, or the expenditure of money; nay, we can follow the invincible Bonaparte through all his military manœuvres, without the fear of being made conscripts, the danger of death, or of mutilation in his desperate battles.

The next step in our academical ladder was Logick, or a knowledge of the art of reasoning. As the former branches, which engaged our attention, related to external things, this made us in some degree acquainted with the powers of the human mind. O! the inexpressible comfort of chopping logick, by which truth is ascertained, error exposed, and ignorance silenced! Let not this branch of our education be objected to, as being

too abstruse and abstracted for our juvenile minds. The human mind, be assured, is capable of much earlier and more extensive expansion than is generally imagined; and though we have not been able fully to comprehend all the intricacies of logical disquisition, yet its elementary principles, which we could comprehend, were so far useful, that they convinced us we were in possession of intellectual powers we should otherwise have been ignorant of, as well as the proper application of them to the art of reasoning. During our progress through these scientifick branches, a portion of each day was devoted to the art of writing, to arithmetick, to the correct reading of the highest English clas-  
sicks, Thomson, Milton, and Young; and our Saturdays to practical Elocution, an examination in our respective Catechisms, and an explanation by our Director, of some of the leading and general principles of Christianity: while the business of each day was commenced and closed by prayer, and the reading of the Holy Scriptures.

Such is the system of education we have passed through in this seminary; and if it be not a complete English education, at least as to elementary principles, which is all that is ever taught in a school, I know not what is: besides in acquiring it, such habits of industry are induced, as must greatly facilitate the progress of higher studies, and accustom the mind to serious thinking.

Thus, ladies and gentlemen, have I given you the outlines of that course of education, which has so happily terminated in presenting us before you this morning. And now, having executed my proposed undertaking, I should congratulate you and myself on its

accomplishment, and with a formal bow retire; were it not that, being the last of the orators of the day, it is incumbent upon me to conclude in the valedictory form.

Permit me, therefore, reverend and respected Sir, to offer you my sincere and most grateful acknowledgments, and those of every individual of my class, for your benevolent attention and unremitting exertions in our behalf. The instruction you have communicated, and the precepts you have inculcated, will, we trust, ever maintain the most active influence upon our future conduct. May you long continue, Sir, to preside over this institution, to dispense similar blessings to our successors, and, in the fullest enjoyment of health, prosperity, and happiness.

The hour of our separation, my dear fellow students, is at length arrived; when we shall either prosecute our studies in other seminaries, or engage in some of the various employments of active life: receive, therefore, my parting advice, to cherish and expand the elements of science here acquired, and to regulate your future conduct by the dictates of religion and morality here delivered. I trust the friendships we have formed during our association here will be continued through life, and that as we advance in age we may make proportional advances in useful knowledge and in practical piety. Farewell, my friends! may the choicest blessings of heaven be liberally bestowed upon you.

To you, young gentlemen of the junior classes, I most earnestly recommend a diligent perseverance in the daily acquisition of knowledge, a cheerful conformity to the discipline of the Institution, and an affectionate and respectful deportment towards your teachers and supe-

riours. Behold in us the reward of diligence, and may you in course experience the honour and satisfaction which we now enjoy.

Accept, respected auditors, my most ardent thanks for the honour conferred on us this day, by your presence; and for your patient and polite attention.